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ABSTRACT

This is a brief report discussing ways of dealing with aggression in individuals. The author feels that previous approaches, such as catharsis or punishment, have proved inadequate, and that a more successful approach to reducing aggression involves the induction of incompatible reactions among aggressors. In the author's opinion, when angry individuals experience empathy toward their victim, feel entertained or amused by them or experience mild sexual arousal, these conditions serve to induce responses which are incompatible with aggressive feelings. (YRJ)

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THE CONTROL OF HUMAN AGGRESSION: AN INCOMPATIBLE RESPONSE STRATEGY

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For many years, it has been widely believed by psychologists that two techniques--catharsis and threatened or actual punishment--are the most effective means of preventing or controlling human aggression. Recent evidence, however, suggests that neither is quite as effective in attaining this goal as was once believed. Catharsis seems to occur only under quite restricted conditions, and the duration of such effects remains in doubt. Similarly, threats of punishment seem to be effective in deterring overt violence only when numerous conditions are met, and actual punishment itself may sometimes tend to enhance rather than inhibit later aggression (for example, when recipients are angered or provoked by such treatment).

In view of these facts, the need for additional procedures designed to reduce the frequency or strength of human aggression is apparent. While many different techniques have been suggested for this purpose, one which appears quite promising is based on the simple fact that all organisms, including human beings, are incapable of engaging in two incompatible responses at once. (For example, it is generally impossible to both daydream and read difficult material, to make passionate love and hold a philosophical discussion, etc.) Extending this basic principle to the control of aggressive behavior, it seems possible that any conditions serving to induce responses or emotional states among aggressors which are incompatible with anger or open assaults against others will be highly effective in preventing such actions.

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Recent investigations conducted both in laboratory and field settings have confirmed this general principle. More specifically, it has been found that the tendency of even strongly angered individuals to aggress against the persons who have provoked them may be sharply reduced through the induction of: (1) feelings of empathy toward the victim (evoked by exposure to signs of pain or suffering on the part of this person), (2) feelings of humor or amusement (elicited through exposure to humorous cartoons and related materials), and (3) mild sexual arousal (induced through exposure to mild erotic stimuli).

In short, it has been found that causing angry individuals to experience empathy toward their victim, to feel entertained or amused, or to experience mild sexual titillation may sharply reduce the strength or frequency of their later assaults against the persons who annoyed them. Given these results, it seems reasonable to suggest that procedures based upon the induction of incompatible reactions among aggressors may ultimately prove to be of considerable use in attempts to prevent or control the occurrence of human violence.

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